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THE ELEVENTH ANNUAL CHILDREN'S THEATRE CONFERENCE

JAMES E. POPOVICH

For eleven years the Children's Theatre Conference has been a vital part of the American educational theatre scene. It has made wide and meaningful contributions to all facets of American culture dealing with children and drama. Each year members of CTC convene at a national meeting to share their activities, their experiences, their interests, and their enthusiasms. This year, the eleventh annual meeting, CTC met on the campus of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, August 22-27. Nearly two hundred participants representing thirty-six states, Canada, Hawaii, Japan, and Mexico attended the conference. Program chairman for the 1955 conference was Paul Kozelka; Albert Mitchell and Gail Plummer served as co-chairmen for the local arrangements. With the aid of many others, their efforts resulted in an exceptionally well-planned and inspiring program.

Setting the stage for the high level of the 1955 program was the keynote speaker, Burdette Fitzgerald. Mrs. Fitzgerald, speaking on a child's need for *all* the arts, commented on the pattern of the present age of specialization which tends to pigeonhole the accom-

plishments of man. This thought process, she warned, comes from "the accumulation and memorization of *other* men's ideas." Mrs. Fitzgerald pointed out that fortunately today there are educators—such as those connected with the Creative Education Foundation—who are dedicated to the belief that this *acceptance* of other men's ideas is inherently stultifying and that more attention should shift to the *production* of original ideas. This is evident in the fields of science and business but is even more apparent in the arts where the full potentialities of children's creativity are explored. And when all avenues of creative endeavor are explored with children, their appreciations are significantly widened. To elucidate these concepts, Mrs. Fitzgerald quoted from De Jong's "The Wheel on the School" and read the long, delightful poem "Circus."

I

After this provocative and entertaining speech, the convention moved to Virginia Tanner's Conservatory of Creative Dance in downtown Salt Lake City. Miss Tanner, whose work in creative dance with children was featured in *Life* magazine several years ago, thrilled the audience with her demonstrations. With three groups of children

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of different ages (7-10, 11-13, 14-18), Miss Tanner described action or episodes which the children creatively danced. At times, dancing themes of their own choosing and of their own creation, the children electrified the audience with the sheer poetry of their movement. In one unit of the program devoted to Night-time when "Some mothers tell stories," the tale, "The King's New Clothes," was effectively and beautifully communicated. Another ("Why Do I Have to Go to Sleep?") was a charming dance about a young boy on a make-believe trip into the brain who learns why he has to go to sleep. It proved to be anatomically educational and aesthetically entertaining. Dancing a folk medley, one of Miss Tanner's assistants, Lola Huth, amazed the delegates with her fluidity of movement and her excellence of pantomimic communication.

The next morning during a critique session on the dance demonstration, Miss Tanner amplified her views on the importance of child-creativity. Asserting that dance (or any art form) is meaningful to children only when they understand and experience, Miss Tanner warned against teaching an art by rote methods. "Beauty and discipline of movement can grow naturally when the children are motivated to think and understand with the help of a creative teacher who makes the children conscious of experiencing rather than conscious of self and techniques." She described several appropriate illustrations of the naiveté of her children's reactions to the public acclaim on their tour to New York and Jacob's Pillow. The success of Miss Tanner's work is revealed by the fact that her school's well-equipped quarters are a gift of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints which

enthusiastically endorses and approves of her methods.

II

Three sessions of the conference were devoted to creative dramatics. One of the sessions was a panel discussion devoted to analyzing the "What and Why of Creative Dramatics," while the other two sessions were demonstrations of the creative dramatics techniques. Ruth Lease, Burdette Fitzgerald, Rita Criste, Richard Adams, and Virginia Lee Comer discussed the goals of creative dramatics: the development of the individual child's personality by encouraging independent thinking, by awakening his imagination, by helping him to express his inner feelings and ideas, by achieving an aesthetic experience, and by participating in a spontaneous activity as a part of a group. They also stressed the important therapeutic values, such as release of frustrations in an organized activity in the home, on the playground, etc., as well as in the school, but emphasized that such "therapy" is preventive rather than remedial in aim because of the limits of professional training of leaders. Questions from the delegate led to a discussion of the value of an "audience" in creative dramatics, with some disagreement among the panelists. Distinction was made among "audiences"—within the group, of peers, of parents, or for a demonstration.

The first demonstration of creative dramatics was with the children from the Institute on Children's Theatre which had preceded the conference. The children were told the story of "Stone Soup" by Virginia Lee Comer, the creative dramatics leader; the children then played the story through twice. The third session was a stimulating one led again by Miss Comer. This time, thirty

delegates served as the participators (playing "The Golden Goose") with an equal number observing. In discussions which followed, Miss Comer pointed out that considerable differences in methods and techniques employed by leaders in creative dramatics are inevitable because of "the differing personalities of the leaders who cannot express their own creative powers in identical patterns and because of the differing needs of groups and requirements of different situations and environments."

In addition to the dance and creative dramatics demonstrations, five major productions of plays, a television show, and an MIA play were presented. The University of Utah television department and KSL-TV produced *Aladdin*; delegates at the conference were invited to attend its rehearsals. The script was written especially for the conference by Madge Miller and Larry Villani; Keith Engar, head of the television work at the University of Utah, staged and produced the half-hour program. The delegates also toured the KSL-TV studios and, earlier, Mr. Engar demonstrated various techniques of television production on a closed circuit. Equally delightful was the brief MIA road show directed by Moana Bennett. Miss Bennett amazed the delegates when she explained the extent of dramatic activity in the Mormon Church. In the Mutual Improvement Association (MIA) of the Mormon Church, family and group participation is phenomenal.

George Lewis' high school students presented Charlotte Chorpenning's *Rumpelstiltskin* in the scenic stone amphitheatre at Aspen Grove in the Uinta National Forest. The production was well adapted to the permanent stone arrangement of the stage, cleverly utilizing a raised area upstage for the "Edge of the World." The play was produced

by Brigham Young University's Children Theatre as a part of the memorial to Mrs. Chorpenning and as a representation of her gifted writing for children's audiences.

Mrs. McThing by Mary Chase was interestingly staged in-the-round by Robert Hyde Wilson. A production of the University of Utah's Playbox Theatre, the play's characters were played by community and university actors. The following day, in analyzing the production, the delegates discussed the differences and advantages in proscenium and arena presentations of *Mrs. McThing*.

A new script, *The Secret of the Jade Goddess*, was presented by the Children's Theatre Playhouse of the University of Denver and Junior Entertainments, Inc. Excellently directed by John De Puglio of Denver, the cast was composed of young people and college students from that city. During the critique session, the children who had seen the play expressed their delight at the magic, the effects, the excitement, and the lavishness of costuming and setting. Although the production was a very stimulating one, it was felt by some that several changes in the script should be made before it is published.

A theatre ballet production of *The Blue Bird* was presented under the general supervision of Barbara Barrie, a dance instructor of the University of Utah's speech department. After an initial discussion by children on their reactions, the critique centered on the director, technical director, and the composer. Implications of the discussion seemed to be that this presentation of *The Blue Bird* may be approached three ways—as a fairy tale, as formal movement, and as an expression in color, sound, and music. Because *The Blue Bird* as a classic appeals on many levels, it was not surprising to find that

the children responded positively to the production.

The last production was of an exciting new script, *The Prince and the Knight*, by Albert Mitchell. Produced by the University of Utah Theatre, the play was excellently directed by the playwright. The script is a treatment of the prince and the pauper theme, rich in medieval atmosphere, dialogue, and characters. Beautifully mounted and staged, the production was a thrilling experience for the children and the delegates.

III

A vital and stimulating part of the conference was devoted to two sessions of discussion groups. These sessions were under the general chairmanship of Agnes Haaga; their theme was a quotation from Hughes Mearnes: "You have something to say. Something of your very own. Try to say it. Don't under-value it." The delegates met in separate interest groups, each one led by a specialist who stimulated the group to share and pool their knowledge and resources. There were six discussion sections.

A discussion group on "Children and the Coordinated Arts" was so stimulating that a third session was scheduled by its chairman, Margaret Woods. Mrs. Woods spoke of the unique potentialities for children's creative development and growth which all the arts offer. Actual participation of the group in a creative experience began by rhythmical interpretation of a filmed nature story which Mrs. Woods had previously shown. She pointed out that the relationship of a creative experience to children's theatre is the "seed from which self-expression will grow and which must signify trust and faith from the inside out."

Grace Price led the discussion group on the problems of touring companies. After analyzing some of the problems and techniques in managing the tour of a play for children, the group concluded that any sponsoring organization must have an oriented program chairman who can book excellent and appropriate plays. The group also recommended that a competent committee view, adjudicate, and recommend touring shows and that an approved list of professional touring companies be made.

The group meeting on children's drama in the private studios, under the leadership of Jean Poull, discussed standards in the private studios and the need for keeping the emphasis on the development of the child. A meeting of all Junior League delegates was also held so that they could share their ideas and problems specific to their various types of producing and sponsoring organizations. Chairman of this discussion group was Mrs. Frank S. Hanna, director of Region X of the Association of Junior Leagues of America. Ruth Lease stressed the adoption of creative dramatics to the areas of Junior League volunteer service; Mrs. Hanna led a discussion of A. J. L. A.'s consultant service in specialized fields of Junior League activities. A great deal of interest was evidenced by the questions and the discussion.

The group analyzing the problems involved in graduate and research work was led by James E. Popovich. The consensus of the group was that too frequently theses or studies in the area of children's theatre are superficial or lacking because of the graduate students' inadequate backgrounds in training and experience. Competent advisement was considered vital if such research is to be a significant contribution. The group concluded that children's theatre courses

at the graduate level should have broad pre-requisite training in drama and that creative dramatics courses should insist on pre-requisite knowledge of children, children's literature, and drama.

The delegates who met to consider children's drama in religious education explored the vast possibilities of drama and faith. Led by Emily Pribble Gillies, the group shared their experiences in adapting religious materials and stories to creative dramatics, dance, and choral reading. A group of volunteers experimented in creating rhythm and movement to accompany the reading of the "150th Psalm." Mrs. Gillies reported that a bibliography of religious dramas is available through the Department of Christian Education of the Episcopal Church, 28 Havemeyer Place, Greenwich, Connecticut.

IV

One of the high points of the conference was an afternoon and evening spent at Aspen Grove in the Provo Canyon. The delegates traveled forty miles on a convoy of buses high into the scenic mountains near Provo. After a short and dynamic speech by Martha Brush, the delegates separated into regional groups. A stimulating hour was spent by the delegates conferring with others from their geographical areas. The plans formulated by each region revealed the strength and enthusiasm of the Children's Theatre Conference at its grass-roots level. After a delicious picnic supper, the delegates assembled at the beautiful outdoor amphitheatre to pay tribute to the late Mrs. Charlotte Chorpenning. In a moving and beautiful speech, Sara Spencer spoke of Mrs. Chorpenning whose death last winter was a great loss to CTC. Rather than mourning, however, the delegates were reminded how Mrs. Chorpenning herself had written of

death. For in one of her plays, an adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty*, she is attempting to teach children how to face personal loss in the death of those they knew and loved. She changed the plot slightly so that in the tower scene, Beauty is sentenced by the bad fairy to die when she puts her finger on the spindle. When Beauty was pricked, she turned to her family, weeping around her, and said, "Mother, I have just found out something wonderful. I found out you won't really be giving me up at all. When you went away a little while ago and left me here alone, I wasn't really alone at all. You were all here with me inside my mind. I shall always be with you like that. I shall be running around in your mind just as I used to run around in your garden. And I shall be laughing, and you must all laugh with me in your thoughts. Laughing together when we love one another is one of the very best things in the world."

V

The relationship of high schools and children's theatre occupied the attention of the delegates for two sessions. During the first one, Jed Davis recounted the problems of producing plays in the high schools for children's audiences, stressing that the technical elements must be imaginative and artistic. George Lewis discussed the philosophy underlying creativity in the high school. Every student has a tremendous storehouse of creativity needing only a chance to release it. Thus, said Mr. Lewis, "more often than not the high school director is a counselor first and a director second."

In the second session devoted to high schools, Leonard Rowley outlined the organization of a children's theatre with high school students within a public school system. He emphasized the neces-

sity of working closely with superintendents and principals. The second speaker was the principal of Mr. Rowley's school, Roy Metcalf, who strongly endorses children's theatre now and regards it as the *best* community project at his school. Mr. Metcalf stated that "extra or co-curricular activities does for the students what the classroom cannot." He deplored the tendency at many schools where athletics is the only avenue of student expression.

A panel emphasizing the school administrator's reaction to children's theatre was also very stimulating. Harvey Taylor, Ellamae Clark, Mrs. L. K. Blower, and Eunice Seaton discussed various phases of the problems of children's theatre and its relationship to the schools, concluding that rapport on aims and methods with the school administrators frequently spells the difference between the failure or success of a children's theatre.

Technical demonstrations were helpful and unusual. One session was devoted to an entertaining and informal technical demonstration by Vern Adix and his staff at the University of Utah Theatre. For one hour the audience was instructed in the use of flash powder, special effects, home-made lighting equipment, painting techniques. At a later session, Virginia Opsvig, assisted by Stanley Huntley, illustrated the emotional effects of color and light on children. Using the children from Miss Tan-ners' creative dance classes and employing various pools of different-colored lighting areas, Miss Opsvig worked creatively with the children, showing the relationship of movement, color, and mood. While no conclusive decisions could be drawn from so short a demonstration, the hour proved to be one of the most fascinating and provocative of the entire conference. An excellent

speech on another phase of production, business management, was given by Gail Plummer. Mr. Plummer outlined the need for intelligent and imaginative promotion of theatrical activity and showed types of brochures, posters, and related materials for use in publicity work.

VI

Many challenging and provocative speeches were made on playwrights and children's theatre here and abroad. Mary Martin, chairman of the New Play Project Committee, sponsored a stimulating session on writing and finding new scripts. Anne Matlack gave a penetrating speech on analyzing scripts. Speaking of the playwright's approach to the study of character, she pointed out how, if he is really engaged upon a study of personality in action, the characters assume wills of their own. She stressed the use of inner action that gives the audience insight into motive, in its relation to invisible action in a play. The second portion of her analysis was devoted to a careful understanding of the function of plot and the common faults which result from mishandling of the plot elements. She deplored the use of gimmicks, padding, commonplace detail, and obvious exposition. Kenneth Carr warned of the pitfalls sometimes catching directors of new scripts. "It is much better to re-read and attempt to find out the author's intent than to go slap-happy with a red pencil."

Four outstanding new scripts which have been produced but not yet published were reviewed. Grace Price imparted a sense of the magnitude and suspense of *Young King Arthur* by Margery Evernden. Mary Ewen recreated the nonsensical high spirits of *Old King Cole* by Joe Grenzback, by singing the songs and giving the delegates as much

lively entertainment as information. Agnes Haaga's rich, animated review of *The Treasure of the Mountain* by Patricia Randles gave it distinction and mystery. Kenneth Carr made the vagaries of Elizabeth Case's *Pippi Longstocking* endearing, and reminded the audience how everyone thirsts for humor and takes to his heart the story of an amiable and resourceful non-conformist. Mary Martin's excellent summary challenged the delegates that no more worthy trace of our progress through the world can be left than that concerned with writing and bringing to life fine plays for children.

Similar attention was given to children's theatre on the broad international scene. Two reports were read from CTC's delegates to the International Theatre Institute at Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. Isabel Burger wrote glowingly of the progress of children's theatre in Germany; Margaret Ellen Clifford, in a delightful vein, gave the delegates an inside look at committee work and Institute organization at the Yugoslavian conference. Gloria Chandler spoke on her experience as a delegate at the Centro Nazionale de Prevenzione e Difesa Sociale conference which was held in Milan, Italy, the week of June 4. This conference was planned with the assistance of UNESCO, with delegates from the United States, Germany, France, and Belgium interested in the impact of mass communication upon children. Miss Chandler related the great language barriers which beset the conference but reported that in Milan, as everywhere where children are concerned, national barriers and differences disappear. An informal note to the international theatre scene was the greeting from Mexico ("Las Mananitas") sung beautifully by Marie Bustos Jefferson.

During the week other speakers contributed significantly to the conference. Frank Whiting, vice-president of AETA, brought greetings from CTC's parent organization. His speech on the need for professional activity among educational theatre workers and the importance of artistic and human goals which we must set for ourselves was both moving and stimulating. James E. Popovich spoke at a banquet honoring new playwrights and introduced those attending the conference.

However stimulating all the other speakers were, the closing luncheon speaker was easily the most eagerly anticipated one of the week. Winifred Ward's talk on "Museums and Space Ships" was humorous and thought-provoking. Miss Ward explained that she did not fear there was any immediate danger to CTC's becoming museumized. She did warn, however, that the best way to avoid its ever happening is constant objective self-evaluation, not only in terms of techniques but also of goals. Imagination is the keynote. "We want our theatre to be alive, swirling with interest. We want our material breathing with life, not outmoded and past its usefulness like so many antiques in a museum. And if we are going to try to win the great audience of older children who are never seen in many children's theatres, we need to remember that though we may love antiques, youth loves life—life not only of the past, but of the present and the future!"

VII

At the final luncheon, Sara Spencer, director of CTC for the past two years, turned over the "gloves" of office to Paul Kozelka. Miss Spencer's stewardship covered a period of many growing pains—a bawling infant not so many years ago, CTC has almost come-of-age

now, having nearly nine hundred members.

The success of the 1955 conference was due largely to Miss Spencer's leadership and to the brilliant planning of the program by Paul Kozelka. Aiding him were many others: Frances Cary Bowen, chairman of the hostesses, Sue Rothwell, President of the Salt Lake Junior League, and Mrs. Gail Plummer in charge of a delicious picnic supper complete with "carrot cookies." A monumental task of organization and hospitality was done by Albert Mitchell and

Gail Plummer, co-chairmen of the local arrangements.

On August 27, after five inspiring and enjoyable days of meeting, the delegates left Salt Lake City with a new sense of dedication and comradeship. Next year, the twelfth annual meeting of the Children's Theatre Conference will be held, August 20-25, at Northwestern University. Until then, CTC members will be hard at work attempting to live up to the high ideals of children's theatre so excellently advanced by the 1955 participants.

A Warning to Sophomores (and others)

Enthusiasm, though founded neither on reason nor divine revelation, but rising from the conceits of a warmed or over-weening brain, works yet, where it once gets footing, more powerfully on the persuasions and actions of men, than either of those two, or both together: men being most forwardly obedient to the impulses they receive from themselves; and the whole man is sure to act more vigorously, where the whole man is carried by a natural motion. For strong conceit, like a new principle, carries all easily with it; when got above common sense, and freed from all restraint of reason, and check of reflection, it is heightened into a divine authority, in concurrence with our own temper and inclination.—John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, chapter 19.